

The Career of Dehumanization towards Cyber Space – An Inglorious Story Vol. 1.

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“I know there is a God because in Rwanda I shook hands with the Devil. I have seen him, I have smelled him and I have touched him. I know the Devil exists and therefore I know there is a God.” (Lieutenant-General Roméo Antonius Dallaire, UNAMIR)²

The aim of this short review is to demonstrate some of the important changes and transformations (if there have been any) of bias and hatred led communication and behaviour in the last approximately hundred years in Europe's mainstream history. What kind of forms and influences of dehumanization are we facing? How, and with what impact has dehumanization thematised common speech? How does its influence define our levels of (in)tolerance? What is the reason behind hate speech and verbal harassment being so easily transferred to Cyber space? How was it possible and what kind of objective reasons are there in the background to make this progress so natural?

Keywords: hate speech, cybercrime, cyberbullying, bias, intolerance, dehumanization

A short article like the present conference paper could only attempt to outline the most important characteristics of its topic, to identify the rationale behind it, and – if possible – recognize the framework, too. *Dehumanization* as a moral-sociocultural phenomenon offers several approaches, all of which are relevant since the various aspects of interpretation influence and hypothesize each other. The definition of the concept itself can have numerous perspectives. The religious, ethical, sociological or psychological methods are just as likely to gain *raison d'être* in the interpretation of the possible manifestations of *dehumanization* as are the aesthetic, legal, or cultural anthropological methods. In this paper, however, by shedding light on the various interpretive frameworks of *dehumanization*, primarily with regards to crime, we attempt to demonstrate the career history of the concept.

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² Dallaire–Beardsley (2005) 562.

To approach *dehumanization*, here stands, perhaps unexpectedly, an aesthetic-historical definition of the concept. “Dehumanization is the deprivation of an art work from any human or anthropocentric concerns; it is a negative symptom of the avant-garde.”³ In other words, in an aesthetic sense the cause and effect of art are separated, thus the essential moment of art is no longer linked to the traditional relationship between creator and recipient or the one between artist and art lover. The way it regards humanity is by disregarding humanity. When the avant-garde work of art concerning its function no longer aspires to be humanized, we witness a dramatic transformation of the theme and concept, that is when the work of art pertains to humans, and it makes sense through them. Instead, it revolts against the “old” aesthetic notion by denying the traditional artistic ethos of mission. The “function” and the “form” appear to claim the privilege of “artistic content” in order to express the artist’s intention.

While the parallel between the above mentioned avant-garde aesthetic concept and the ethical, politico-historical understanding of *dehumanization* might only be superficial, it still offers some potential. The idea that the things we humans – namely, moral and social beings – do are, in an ethical sense, bound to the choices we make, depending on to whom and to what group of people we do these things, might in essence lead to the relativization of the fundamental ethical function of what makes us human. It leads to a situation where the foundations of ethics are being questioned and become immoral in themselves.⁴ One might casually evoke Nietzsche and his work on the genealogy of morality, or the re-evaluation of values, but I would advise against any hasty generalizations. While Nietzsche was primarily concerned with how the moral concept of truth was distorted and turned on its head in the past two thousand years of Christian culture, to us the question is whether, in the trivial sense, it is possible to separate our actions from the ethical foundations of what makes us human. If it is possible, and as we shall see, we argue that it is exactly what happens during *dehumanization*, that leads to the suspension, or even the elimination of moral perspectives: it leads to man’s denial of his own humanity. This creates an “empty space”⁵ in the Arendtian⁶ sense, which by its very nature carries its own failure to narrate and process and, which

³ See *Dehumanizáció (Dehumanization)* Kislexikon.hu Available: <www.kislexikon.hu/dehumanizacio.html> (Downloaded: 01.09.2017.)

⁴ This is similar to Nietzsche’s notion of the *Genealogy of Morals*, the essence of which is iterated by Deleuze as: “The problem of critique is that of the value of values, of the evaluation from which their value arises, thus the problem of their creation.” In Deleuze, Gilles (2002): *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. Trans. by Hugh Tomlinson. London, Continuum. 1.

⁵ “While the totalitarian state ideology banishes its enemies (Jews, liberals, etc.) from all levels of social and physical existence, defining them as “empty spaces”, it reveals the yet unknown depths of banal Evil, and thus eliminates all possibilities of narration.” In Balassa Bence (2009): *A politikai és esztétikai narráció, avagy az emberi sors vállalásának útjai*. (Political and Aesthetic Narration, or the Ways of Assuming Human Fate.) Unpublished Conference Paper. Debrecen, Meritum Conference.

⁶ Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) was a German-born Jewish American political theorist and philosopher; she was Martin Heidegger’s and Karl Jaspers’ student.

might seem contradictory, produces its own “banality”.⁷ In other words, it is obvious that the 20th century mass historical phenomena of Europe,⁸ which in the hands of totalitarian regimes were transformed into human slaughterhouses, create the false illusion of monumental character and even “innovation” with all their inconceivability in order to justify themselves by taking the metaphysical claim for sympathy. However, what human intellect finds is no other than the poignantly *banal* vulgarity of Evil. In Arendt’s understanding, human Evil is realized in the perfect death industry of the 20th century that came to its ultimate form and state in the pits of totalitarian camps. Except it is inconceivable, it cannot be integrated into history in a linear way. These atrocities and those who committed them do not necessarily follow from history’s past events or structures, and are not of satanic origins, and there is nothing demonic or diabolic in them either. As Festinger writes about mass events during which a lot of people *suffer from the same dissonance*: “It may be, however, that there is nothing more unusual about these phenomena than the relative rarity of the specific combination of ordinary circumstances that brings about their occurrence.”⁹ On the contrary, these people are grey, stale, banal nobodies of the masses who lack any character or charisma. This is the banality of Evil, no more, no less. It refers to the complete lack of form and identity, that all the pathos of recognition is redundant. The death factories were run by such mass nobodies who, operating on the plane of banalities, reduced these mass murders to a routine by systematically and entirely neglecting their own conscience. The most important command of the *Ten Commandments*, namely “*thou shalt not kill*”, which is taken by more or less every normal human society as a moral standard, was changed by the Evil of Nazi Germany to “*thou shalt kill*”. By doing so, the “quality of temptation”¹⁰ (that it is forbidden), the characteristic by which most people are able to identify Evil, was eliminated. With the dehumanization of the victims the mass murders came to be

⁷ “Arendt did not claim more, nor less, than Evil (namely: The Evil in her story, more precisely: the perpetrators of the evil deeds recited in her story) is not of satanic origin, it is way simpler (complicated): it is banal. As such, it is naturally human. In other words, those who actively participated in genocides are ordinary people – like me and you, my friend. Today this statement does not seem outrageous. While the activity of Evil does not decrease, its essence becomes easier to recognize.” In Mesés Péter: *Miért éppen gonosz, miért éppen banalitás? (Why Evil, Why Banality?) Kulturális és Kommunikációs Központ Alapítvány*. Available: www.c3.hu/~exsymposion/HTML/gonosz/Meses/kerete.htm (Downloaded: 01.09.2017.)

⁸ Here is an adequate parallel from Leon Festinger, who theorized the reduction of cognitive dissonance in the context of socially advocated mass events: “Under such circumstances, the striking and dramatic aspects of mass phenomena exist not because something exceptional or unique is brought into the situation, but only because social support is particularly easy to find in the pursuit of dissonance reduction.” In Festinger, Leon (1985) [1957]: *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. California, Stanford UP. 233–234.

⁹ *Ibid.* 233.

¹⁰ “And just as the law in civilized countries assumes that the voice of conscience tells everybody “Thou shalt not kill”, even though man’s natural desires and inclinations may at times be murderous, so the law of Hitler’s land demanded that the voice of conscience tell everybody: “Thou shalt kill”, although the organizers of the massacres knew full well that murder is against the normal desires and inclinations of most people. Evil in the Third Reich had lost the quality by which most people recognize it – the quality of temptation. Many Germans and many Nazis, probably an overwhelming majority of them, must have been tempted not to murder, not to rob, not to let their neighbours go off to their doom (for that the Jews were transported to their doom they knew, of course, even though many of them may not have known the gruesome details), and not to become accomplices in all these crimes by benefiting from them. But, God knows, they had learned how to resist temptation.” In Arendt, Hannah (1963): *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York, Viking Press. 8.

accepted and in a moral sense, they lost their tragic element, and became the generally accepted – one might say: they became common; the banal backbone of unanimity and social cohesion. Thanks to human conformity the adaptation of this phenomenon was gradually carried out relatively uninterrupted and over a fairly short period of time.¹¹

And what is left after all this? The complete denial of responsibility, a disregard for the importance of human ethical perspectives, the refusal of that primal context which morally restricts man. Monotonous, dull and apathetic, that is to say “worn-out” evil crimes that are perfectly isolated, thus are not able to recognize and perceive their own evilness. The direct and “banal” consequence of dehumanizing victims is that the perpetrators become a faceless, grey mass, a typical characteristic of the totalitarian systems. The way dehumanization operates is, at the same time, a trap. Though the perpetrators cannot perceive or understand it, it is their own humanity which is at stake. No matter if they question the humanness of their fellow human beings or groups of people who constitute the objects of their hatred. They also become undoubtedly alienated from their own fundamental humanity – their own humanness – as way of affirming the process. They only appear to keep their distance from the “Other”. In reality, the distorting effects of hatred cast their own hideous shadow on the culprits and become the reason for their degeneration in a psychological-ethical sense. Dehumanization, that is the immoral gesture of people refusing to regard their fellow people human beings, does not secure any difference between culprit and victim; on the contrary, it makes them equal in the most banal way possible.

Dehumanization rarely occurs unprecedented and unstructured. Still according to Arendt, it follows and is more typical of total or, more precisely, totalitarian thinking; it illustrates its infamous enemy myth. There are numerous historical examples even if the surface divergence between these examples is undeniable. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt attributes two prime precedents to these ideologies that dehumanize victims, and indeed, in the moral and social sense treat them as an “empty space”, a hiatus. These are tribal nationalisms as “the driving force behind continental imperialism”,¹² antisemitism, and the related race theories. Tribal nationalism in Arendt does not mean a real tribal context or any primal form of living. Arendt isolates the two ways in which nationalism has evolved. On the one hand, she identifies the firm, collective, national feelings of the powerful, developed, Western countries of the 19th century with the nationalism of nation states; and on the other hand, Arendt presents “tribal

¹¹ “There are compelling situations in which conformity can be disastrous and tragic. Moreover, even knowledgeable and sophisticated decision makers can fall prey to special kinds of conformity pressures inherent in making group decisions. Consider the following examples: In his memoirs, Albert Speer, one of Adolf Hitler’s top advisers, describes the circle around Hitler as one of total conformity – deviation was not permitted. In such an atmosphere, even the most barbarous activities seemed reasonable because the absence of dissent, which conveyed the illusion of unanimity.” In Aronson, Elliot (1999) [1972]: *The Social Animal*. New York, Worth Publishers. 16.

¹² “Tribal nationalism, the driving force behind continental imperialism, had little in common with the nationalism of the fully developed Western nation state.” In Arendt, Hannah (1973) [1948]: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. San Diego, Harcourt Brace. 229.

nationalism” through the *pan-movements*¹³ of the oppressed minorities in Central European countries (mainly the Austro–Hungarian Empire, Czarist Russia, and the Balkan states) in the second half of the 19th century. “Tribal nationalism, spreading through all oppressed nationalities in Eastern and Southern Europe, developed into a new form of organization, the *pan-movements*, among those peoples who combined some kind of national home country, Germany and Russia, with a large, dispersed irredenta, Germans and Slavs abroad.”¹⁴ The pan-movements abandoned the two thousand-year old Judeo–Christian tradition, according to which man has divine origin, and instead, they “preached the divine origin of their own people”.¹⁵ Of course, this paper on the phenomenon of dehumanization is not necessarily limited to the list of Nazi atrocities against humanity. From an ideological, or internal-logical and operational point of view we get an extremely similar picture of the millions who were exterminated in the gulags of Stalin’s Russia, or another of the ethnic conflict between the Hutus and the Tutsis, which resulted in the Rwandan genocide in 1994 with more than 900, 000 deaths in only a few weeks, which was assisted by the UN (namely, the nations of the world and primarily Bill Clinton’s United States).

“The killing quickly spread to the whole country. One such massacre occurred in Nyarubuye. The officials and the RTLM¹⁶ called for civilians to kill their Tutsi neighbours. Those who were not willing to do so, were killed in most cases. »You either participated in the slaughter, or you got slaughtered.« – recalled a Hutu, who was forced to kill. A Hutu farmer Gitera Rwamuhizi, who was implicated in the genocide, said that the Tutsis have treated them with disdain, and were said to have come from Egypt and abused the Hutus in slavery for centuries. On the day of the massacre the Hutus went to kill like they were going to the marketplace.”¹⁷

“Like they were going to the marketplace” might echo in our ears. What could be more of a commonplace, more banal? Hutu radio stations constantly broadcasted slogans and appeals encouraging people to exterminate the “cockroaches”. These “cockroaches” were the Hutus’ brothers, the Tutsis, the other ethnicity that formed the state of Rwanda. But they were not referred to as humans but as insects or pests, and it would be foolish to think that more than a decade after the events these strong emotions are

¹³ “The hallmark of the pan-movements was that they never even tried to achieve national emancipation, but at once, in their dreams of expansion, transcended the narrow bounds of a national community and proclaimed a folk community that would remain a political factor even if its members were dispersed all over the earth.” Ibid. 232.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid. 233. Cf. Hitler’s last speech from January 30, 1945, as recorded in the *New York Times*, January 31: “God the Almighty has made our nation. We are defending His work by defending its very existence”; or the words of Luke, the Archbishop of Tambov, as quoted in *The Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, No. 2, in 1944: “The German monsters are not only our foes, but God’s foes.”

¹⁶ Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLMC) was a Rwandan radio station.

¹⁷ See *Rwandan Genocide* Wikipedia. Available: [www. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rwandan_genocide](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rwandan_genocide) (Downloaded: 01.09.2017.)

gone.¹⁸ They need to legitimize the genocide, to justify the unjustifiable, moreover, they must be able to prove that this morally unacceptable act – in our case, a genocide – was not against humans but arthropods, so nothing really happened in the ethical sense.

By demonstrating the narrative apparatuses of nationalism and pan-movements, these examples are suitable first and foremost to illustrate how the scale of dehumanization reaches the horizon of nations and nationalities with them. The fanatic belief in divine origin and the “chosenness” of our people have at least two political advantages. On the one hand, it positions national identity “outside” of history, rendering it no longer dependent on historical temporality, that it “no longer could be touched by history”.¹⁹ On the other hand, it is an identity-forming power by which members of a nation are able to experience kinship among themselves, or their absolute difference from other, nondivine peoples.²⁰

Dehumanization as the danger of coded, apodictic, spiritual modality²¹ lies exactly in the Arendtian sense of banality. It lies in the Evil that conforms it to public discourse; that renders it an established way of speaking; that integrates it as widely accepted, eliminating even the possibility of self-reflexivity in Evil, which would make it easy to recognize for everyone. The poisonous nature of such thinking can still be detected from the perspectives of psychology and communication even if it is degraded to a cliché and thus appears harmless. “... there is no problem with Russian life in which like a »comma« there is no question: How to cope with the Jew.”²²

Probably the most obvious and still somewhat obscure truth in the history of discrimination is that it will inevitably cause isolating anxiety in both (or any) parties (the discriminated and the discriminators). Identity is questioned in both roles although it is not necessarily recognized.

The stages and internal dynamics of dehumanization – as stated above – correspond to the *self-justification* process²³ we know well from socio-psychology. If we cannot morally justify or account for our actions to ourselves and to those around us – society – it will shortly lead to role strain that is unbearable to the psyche, ultimately resulting in identity crisis. The mind, according to the theory of dissonance reduction,²⁴ will try

¹⁸ “Fourteen years after the genocide the incitement of hatred against the Tutsi minority in schools still has not stopped, said a Rwandan Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry. According to the report, a total of 84 schools are affected by the propaganda against Tutsis in the Central African country. There were leaflets, for example, which called them snakes. The leaflet says: »We have had enough of them, will kill them all!«” In *Tutsziellenes propaganda a ruandai iskolákban.* (Anti-Tutsi Propaganda in Rwandan Schools.) Available: www.index.hu/kulfold/hirek/338378/ (Downloaded: 01.09.2017.)

¹⁹ Arendt (1973) [1948]: *op. cit.* 234.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ I use the expression “apodictic – necessary – modality” in the sense of Kant’s theory of judgement. “According to Kant, the modality of a judgment means the judging subject’s relationship to the validity of the judgement.” In Rathmann János (1996): *Idegen szavak a filozófiában.* Budapest, Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó. 169.

²² Rozanov, Vassiliff (1929): *Fallen Leaves.* In Arendt (1973) [1948]: *op. cit.* 229.

²³ “Most people are motivated to justify their own actions, beliefs, and feelings. When they do something, they will try, if at all possible, to convince themselves (and others) that it was a logical, reasonable thing to do.” In Aronson (1999) [1972]: *op. cit.* 180.

²⁴ “...it does mean that if the cognitive elements do not correspond with a certain reality which impinges, certain pressures must exist.” In Festinger (1985) 11.

to avoid this at any rate. In the context of dehumanization as a cognitive process we can recognize the two most important ways to restore the balance or the compliance between the “pressure of reality” and the cognitive elements of the mind. Firstly, it is the systematic degradation of victims, the methods of depriving them of any qualities or means of human existence in order to create an ethical distance that can divide the related human qualities of the two sides. This is necessary to render the moral consequence of future deeds questionable, moreover, eliminable. We have encountered numberless examples of this (Jews dispossessed of their citizenship and then of their human rights, the Nuremberg Laws, numerus clausus, limited property rights, the ban on mixed marriages, ghettos, placing people outside of the law, wagons, death camps...). The second phase is the active phase of affirming acts, during which social responsibility is, on the one hand, proliferated by the extrapolation of the falsely created moral picture of reality, and is later thought to be eliminated. On the other hand, committing the atrocities might not be hindered by public morality. Through its own banality, Evil is exempted from its terrible cognitive obstacles: it becomes accepted, ordinary.

In this aspect it is not unlike the tragic consequences of online school bullying. The dynamics of dehumanization is the same. Their motives can be various but both are characterized by an irrational anger against the victim, which is accompanied by feelings of shame that might – due to cognitive tension – trigger more anger. When the level of dissonance had become intolerable for the psyche, one way to reduce the “pressure of reality” is to degrade the victim. That is when we face the cruelty of children. Name-calling, discrimination, spreading rumours, making victims “untouchable”, labelling, physical abuse, online bullying, driving victims to suicide. Each and every feature points to the same thing. You do not belong here; you cannot be integrated from the community’s point of view; you are an outcast. It would be better if you killed yourself. If a group (e.g. a classroom community) ostracizes a victim, being subsequently displaced, his or her immunity is thus terminated according to group dynamics. The victim is going to be a pariah to whom the same moral rules and conditions no longer apply as to everyone else. The effects of this is amplified on the internet. Due to potential anonymity and the lack of physical contact, bullies are substantially more daring than in person. Since no meta-communicative rules apply, nothing will reduce the disastrous pressure put on the victim. In addition, the bully’s cognitive perspective will simply not extend to the recognition that the victim is as much of a human being as he or she is.

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